

Feudalism

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What is Feudalism?

•Feudalism is an all-in-one system... it includes a political, economic and a social structure. Officially, it is a system in which land or services are exchanged for protection or loyalty.

•**Politically**, feudalism tends to be a *de-centralized system*. Although there is a king or ruler who in theory has the most power, the authority wielded by the king is not overwhelming, and is generally limited somewhat by the power of local lords.



•**Economically**, feudalism is 'grounded' in the possession of land. In general, land = power and money. Therefore, the economy tends to be agrarian. In fact, often feudal economies operate on the barter system, without currency, much trade, or a sophisticated economic construct.

•**Socially**, feudalism yields a fairly rigid and stratified social structure. Social position is generally determined by the quantity of land owned, and that is generally determined by birth.



European Feudal Social Structure

•The upper classes comprised, perhaps, 5% of the general population in Medieval Europe. In order, the classes were made up of the King, lords, lesser lords and knights. Knights were the warrior class, and generally were the younger sons of lords or lesser lords.

•The lower classes were the other 95% of the population and were made up of merchants & artisans, peasants and serfs.

How does it work?

•In theory, the King owns all of the land in the kingdom. He cannot possibly oversee the administration of it all, so he divides the land and delegates administration of that land to his friends.

•Each of his friends is called a lord, and is put in charge of an enormous tract of land. (The King also has his own tract of land.) In reality, these tracts are too much for one lord to administer, so each lord will further sub-divide the land into smaller tracts which he will contract with lesser lords to administer. These lesser lords owe loyalty and perhaps military service to the lord, just as the lord owes it to the king.

•It seems all neat and clear in terms of loyalties until some enterprising lesser lord signs a feudal contract with two different lords. He gains land and perhaps favors in return for service.

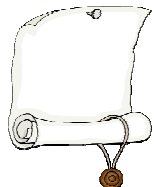
•It becomes messy when his two lords go to war with each other. As a lesser lord who has signed a feudal contract with each, he owes **EACH** military service and loyalty. Which one does he support in the conflict?

•Feudalism tended to create a web of confusing and conflicting loyalties.



Feudal Contracts

•Feudal contracts were signed **ONLY** by members of the upper classes. In a feudal contract, a lesser lord received a fief (estate) from a lord, and promised certain specified services in return. Such services might include military service, days of labor, or percentage of crops harvested.



1. What is feudalism?

4. In theory, how does feudalism work?

a. How is land divided?

2. Describe feudalism's impact...

b. Who is put in charge of it?

c. What is owed?

d. Why could this system become a complicated web of loyalties?

5. What is a feudal contract?

6. Who are the parties in a feudal contract?

3. Describe feudalism's social structure.

7. What was exchanged?

Political	Social	Economic

1. What is feudalism?

Feudalism is an all-in-one system... it includes a political, economic and a social structure. Officially, it is a system in which land or services are exchanged for protection or loyalty.

2. Describe feudalism's impact...

Political	Feudalism tends to be a <i>de-centralized system</i> . Although there is a king or ruler who in theory has the most power, the authority wielded by the king is not overwhelming, and is generally limited somewhat by the power of local lords.
Social	Feudalism yields a fairly rigid and stratified social structure. Social position is generally determined by the quantity of land owned, and that is generally determined by birth.
Economic	Feudalism is 'grounded' in the possession of land. In general, land = power and money. Therefore, the economy tends to be agrarian. In fact, often feudal economies operate on the barter system, without currency, much trade, or a sophisticated economic construct.

3. Describe feudalism's social structure.

The upper classes were about 5% of the general population, and included King, lords, lesser lords and knights. The lower classes were the other 95% of the population and were made up of merchants & artisans, peasants and serfs.

4. In theory, how does feudalism work?

a. How is land divided?

The King owns all of the land in the kingdom, and since he cannot possibly oversee the administration of it all, he divides it and delegates administration of that land to his friends.

b. Who is put in charge of it?

Each of his friends is called a lord, and is put in charge of an enormous tract of land. These tracts are too much for one lord to administer, so each lord will further sub-divide the land into smaller tracts which he will contract with lesser lords to administer.

c. What is owed?

The lesser lords owe loyalty and perhaps military service to the lord, just as the lord owes it to the king.

d. Why could this system become a complicated web of loyalties?

When lesser lords sign multiple feudal contracts and have multiple lords, this can become complicated... especially when it comes to conflict and warfare.

5. What is a feudal contract?

Upper class agreement involving land & loyalty.

6. Who are the parties in a feudal contract?

Lords and Lesser Lords (or Lords and King).

7. What was exchanged?

A fief (estate) was given in exchange for service (military, labor or % of crops).

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